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PROJECT CONCERN--A REVIEW AND A LOOK AHEAD.

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THIS BRIEF REVIEW OF PROJECT CONCERN, AN EDUCATIONAL EXPERIMENT IN WHICH INNER CITY MINORITY GROUP CHILDREN ARE BEING BUSED TO SUBURBAN MIDDLE CLASS SCHOOLS, SUMMARIZES THE PROJECT'S SUCCESSFUL FEATURES. CONTRARY TO POPULAR MISCONCEPTIONS, AN OVERWHELMING NUMBER OF RANDOMLY SELECTED MINORITY GROUP PARENTS AGREED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE TRANSFER PROGRAM AND TO TAKE PART IN VARIOUS ACTIVITIES IN THE SUBURBAN SCHOOLS. THE PROJECT CHILDREN HAVE BEEN WELL ACCEPTED IN THE SUBURBAN SCHOOLS, PARTICIPATE FULLY IN EXTRACURRICULAR EVENTS, ARE ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT THEIR NEW SCHOOLS, AND HAVE NOT BECOME ISOLATED FROM THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD PEERS. THE BEHAVIOR OF THE CHILDREN AND THEIR RATE OF ACADEMIC GROWTH HAVE BEEN GOOD, ALTHOUGH THEY STILL REMAIN BEHIND SUBURBAN CHILDREN IN ALL ACADEMIC AREAS. IT IS FELT THAT SUBURBAN PLACEMENT IS A "HIGHLY PROMISING" EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION. (NH)

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June 2, 1967

PROJECT CONCERN: A REVIEW AND A LOOK AHEAD

Project Concern, Hartford's bold, experimentally based program that takes youngsters - by and large minority group youngsters - from the core city and plunges them directly into the schools of the more affluent suburbs is now reaching the end of its first year of operation. It has been a year of firsts, a year of mistakes and hesitations, but above all a year of exploration and ultimate discovery. Final answers are not available, nagging questions still remain. But most of the old myths have been shown to be empty fears. The evidence has clearly answered these: 1) the Negro and Puerto Rican community do not wish to have their youngsters go to school outside of their own neighborhood - Project Concern selected its original 266 youngsters randomly from all youngsters attending school in Hartford that had 85% or more non-white population. Out of this original selection 96% of the families agreed to participate. 2) the neighborhood school is important for parent involvement - this, perhaps the most persistent of all myths, seems to be totally without base. Better than 90% of our families have taken part in school activities out in the suburbs; communication between school and parent has been at a high level in all regards. Parent teacher conferences have been held as regularly scheduled; parents have been in contact with teachers over academic or behavioral difficulties; and above all, there has been a strong expression of allegiance to the school to which a youngster has been assigned by each Hartford family. They have come to feel that the school that their child goes to perhaps 15 to 20 miles away,

is their school. 3) city youngsters with a different cultural background will feel out of place in the middle class suburb - the demands upon Project Concern to furnish late busses so that youngsters can take part in boy and girl scout activities, athletic activities, club activities, and simply play at the homes of the white suburban classmates underline the fallacy of this myth. Project Concern youngsters have not found that they have been tolerated on a 9 to 3 basis in suburban schools; rather, their open enthusiasm in the schools has earned for them a total welcome by the other youngsters. 4) the psychological trauma of being confronted with academic demands far beyond their present capabilities will be of lasting negative impact - the openly expressed enthusiasm of Project Concern youngsters for their suburban schools, their high daily attendance rate (exceeding 90%) which is maintained in spite of rather lengthy bus trips, lack of shelter at the bus stops, and the number of other inconveniences suggests that the impact has been much more positive than negative. In fact, interview after interview with these youngsters emphasizes that their own choice would be to remain in the suburban school rather than return to the Hartford school. In similar fashion, the small number of dropouts during the academic year is further evidence of the absence of psychological trauma. A total of 15 youngsters have withdrawn for a number of reasons from Project Concern: six have moved from town, five were withdrawn in the month of September for reasons of inconvenience to the family, and four others have been withdrawn because of behavioral or emotional difficulties during the year. 5) these youngsters will become isolated from their peers in the Northend of Hartford - again the facts fail to support the myth. At each bus stop in the morning Project youngsters gather along with other youngsters from the Northend,

play together, and then board their bus to the suburbs; as they return in the afternoon, they disembark from their bus and immediately join in with their peers in the Northend in various activities. 6) minority group youngsters with their poor academic skills will disrupt the learning of the suburban classroom - this again has proved to be no more than the fantasy of someone's mind. Some Project youngsters have been a problem; but the percentage has been no greater than with any other 260 odd youngsters. Typically, Project youngsters have fitted into classrooms with no difficulty and many of the teacher reports stress their ideal behavior. In fact, imperative analysis of teacher reports on Project youngsters while they attended Hartford schools preceding years with teacher reports on Project youngsters this year in the suburban school emphasizes the positive influence which suburban placement has had upon the overt behavior of Project children. 7) the discrepancy between the skills which suburban children have and those which the inner city children have can only result in a greater sense of frustration and lower self esteem - in no instance has any myth been more completely destroyed than this one. The positive attitude of roject children toward school and teachers is clear evidence their esteem has been raised rather than lowered. But beyond this, the academic growth reported on our youngsters through test results and teacher reports is dramatic evidence of the increase in skills which Project youngsters have achieved during the year. This is a testament to the youngsters, to their parents, and to their teachers. Although Project youngsters remain significantly behind suburban youngsters in all academic areas, the rate of growth which Project youngsters have demonstrated during the year is a triumph to the youngster and a challenge to the educator who must now face

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the fact that earlier failures lie not within the child but within the society.

Project Concern's first year has in this way, destroyed the myths that were raised so vigorously a year ago. The future is one that is filled with promise and with hope. The right of each child to dream has been established through the efforts of these 260 odd youngsters; that they have had the courage to dream in spite of all the myths, in spite of all the obstacles, and in spite of the many easy ways out is a testament to the vigor, resilience and capability of our inner city children. Connecticut's bold experiment has already demonstrated the tremendous potentiality of our youth. The extent of this potentiality and how it may best be developed through different techniques of intervention must await more careful analyses of data which will not be available until the end of the 1967-68 school year. Yet, even the most timorous must admit that much has been shown. And it has been the children and their parents who have made these demonstrations. Clearly, it is too early to talk about Project Concern as the model intervention for cities like Hartford; yet in light of the depressing results, replicated again and again in cities throughout the United States, of attempting to upgrade the neighborhood school in the inner city through smaller class size, special service personnel, new facilities and media, suburban placement of inner city youngsters remains a highly promising - if yet unproven - educational intervention. The exploration of this promise and the encouragement of each youngster's right to dream, and of each youngster's right to discover what he might be lies to a large extent in the hands of the Connecticut suburban communities.

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